

THE KENNEDY PLOTS

THE PLOT TO KILL THE PRESIDENT

BY G. ROBERT BLAKEY
AND RICHARD N. BILLINGS

Fitzhenry & Whiteside, 428 pages, \$20.25

BEST EVIDENCE

BY DAVID S. LIFTON

Collier Macmillan, 747 pages, \$18.95

REVIEW BY DERMOT P. NOLAN

The end came for John Kennedy that Friday in Dallas. For 17 years, the 35th President of the United States has rested in his grave. But the restless search for answers about that day does not end.

The Warren Commission found that Lee Harvey Oswald acted alone. But critics said that was too neat and the cracks in the crackpot theory widened.

Enter the House Select Committee on Assassinations. In 1978, using a tape recording of the actual assassination from a motorcycle policeman's jammed transmitter, it concluded beyond doubt that Kennedy was killed as a result of a conspiracy involving at least two gunmen. But the committee made no conclusion about who or why or how. Now two new books try to fill that void.

Robert Blakey and Richard Billings proclaim "the definitive story" in *The Plot To Kill The President*. It is for them to say what the committee could not, or would not: organized crime killed JFK.

Billings is a former editor of *Life Magazine* and it is clearly his input that gives the work its readability and dramatic style. Blakey was chief counsel and staff director of the committee with a background as professor law and director of The Notre Dame Institute on Organized Crime, a former special prosecutor under Robert Kennedy and Chief Counsel to the McClenan Senate Committee on organized crime in the fifties.

Meanwhile, assassination aficionado David Lifton, with no credentials other than an obsession, an attention to detail and 15 years of research, has come up with the wildest and most disturbing theory of all in *Best Evidence*.

Blakey and Billings concentrate

on the who and why. They examine the organized crime network in extensive, often unnecessary detail. Blakey is obsessed with the mob and therein lies both his credibility and his bias. But the analysis is sound, reasonable and mostly logical.

The chilling intrigue uncovered by their investigation makes Watergate look like a teddy bears' picnic, and the Warren Commission's report is revealed as nothing more than a superficial glance at the question, designed to calm a hysterical nation by confirming what it wanted to hear: one nut acted alone.

Chief Justice Earl Warren's first act was to rule that the commission need not seek subpoena power because it could "rely on the reports of the investigative agencies." It was considered unnecessary to examine the photographs or X-rays taken at the autopsy. Only a fraction of the participants in the denouement were interviewed and despite the fact that the majority of the eyewitnesses concluded that the shots came from the front of the Kennedy motorcade, the commission concluded that there was "no credible evidence" that the shots came from anywhere but the book depository behind the motorcade.

Blakey's conclusions are much less comforting. Their sinister implications and their entirely believable presentation shatter any reasonable concept of a social and political order. The effect is devastating, though at least one whimsical aside strains the imagination — the authors' suggestion that it was Kennedy's dalliance with mobster Sam Giancana's paramour, Judith Campbell Exner, that sealed his death contract.

Lifton, however, would have us believe that a group of conspirators stage-managed a fantastic deception featuring the theft of JFK's body. He maintains that

secret surgery was performed on the corpse to change the visible direction of the wounds to support the single-assassin theory. It was a medical forgery that was delivered to the autopsy doctors, he says.

But Lifton's book, which reads like a mystery thriller, presents far too many troubling facts to be dismissed as fiction; if Blakey and Billings wrote a whodunnit, Lifton's book is a howdunnit.

In a gripping, though indulgent and righteous first-person narrative, he says the experts have been looking for answers in all the wrong places. The president's body is "the best evidence." By surgically altering it, the conspirators (he implies it was the secret service) accomplished the complete deception. He points out that the doctors in Dallas concluded that Kennedy was shot from the front and they observed a large exit wound at the back of the head. The autopsy doctors in Washington, however, received a body with a wound on the top of the head that was four times the size of the wound described by the Dallas doctors. The Dallas doctors say they performed no surgery but, when the body was delivered for the autopsy, the autopsy doctors concluded that surgery had been performed at the top of the skull. The body that left Dallas was wrapped in a sheet, delivered for

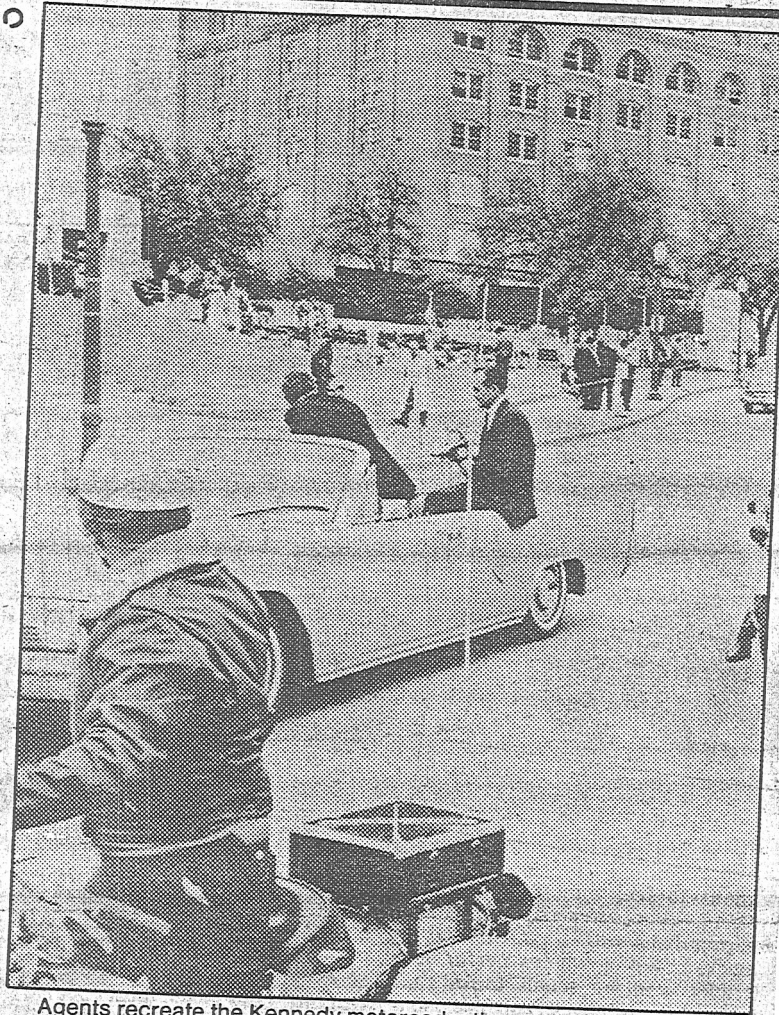
autopsy in a zippered bag.

The book requires an adventurous imagination and a strong stomach. Lifton's focus on the medical aspects is an embarrassing mixture of ghoulishness and sacrilege about stuffing plaster of Paris into the empty cranium of one of the world's most gifted leaders. However, the startling contradictions in the evidence and the weight of Lifton's awesome research give some of the work an unsettling authenticity.

In the end, both books are flawed by the same process that doomed the Warren Commission — both come to their conclusions first and then marshal the evidence and the authority to support them. The simple truth is that the assassination is an infinite jigsaw puzzle with parts that have been lost for all time.

The most publicly scrutinized crime in history is, in the final analysis, the most perfect crime. One observer explained why: "If (an organization) wanted to have someone knocked off, the top man would speak to someone who would speak to someone who would speak to someone else and order it. The man who actually does the gun work does not know who ordered it. To trace that back is virtually impossible." The observer: Robert F. Kennedy.

Dermot P. Nolan is a Hamilton lawyer.



Agents recreate the Kennedy motorcade: the most perfect crime

The restless search for answers to Kennedy's death.
Adventurous imaginations, strong stomachs needed